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Introducing Student as Producer: A Bristol perspective

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Next week Professor Mike Neary, of the University of Lincoln, speaks at [a BILT Ed Ex event](#) on the 'Student as Producer' approach. I have been inspired by Neary's radical approach to pedagogy in my own teaching practice designing and delivering undergraduate units in the School of Management here at the University of Bristol. In this blog, I will say a few words about it by way of introduction, and say a little about what I have found interesting and useful about it.

Student as Producer's chief selling point is that it seeks to overcome the fraught relationship between teaching and research catalysed by the changes in contemporary higher education. It reunites research and teaching by creating a learning environment that blurs the boundaries between the two not only for teachers but, most importantly, for learners.

Influenced by Frankfurt School critical theory, and the radical pedagogy of touchstone texts like Paolo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Jacques Ranciere's *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Student as Producer challenges the sometimes contradictory relationships of hierarchy, authority and passivity constructed around the consumer-provider contract implicit in the contemporary university.

The approach emphasises collaboration between students and academics to co-produce knowledge, so that, as Neary [puts it](#), 'the student feels part of the academic project of the institution, in the context of that institution's relationship with the external world'. In my experience of drawing on Student as Producer in my teaching and unit design here at Bristol, it chimes well with the commitment in the University's [Education Strategy](#) to a 'research-rich' learning experience.

A life more deeply conceived

The roots of this approach go right back to the model for the modern university established at the Friedrich Wilhelms University in Berlin in 1811. [Writing with Joss Winn](#), Neary highlights how this model took teaching and research to exist in sympathy, courses consisting of tutors and students engaged together in 'research communities' where the independent time and space for 'speculative thinking' and 'Socratic dialogue' substituted for strict curricula dictated by state or commercial imperatives.

Already in the 1910s, [Walter Benjamin](#) bemoaned how this collectivist Humboltian idea, which has 'students as teachers and learners at the same time', had subsided as an increasingly vocational and individualist spirit of 'office and profession' had subsumed the university. Benjamin's alternative, which [Neary sees](#) as foundational to the project of 'student as producer', was that the student be included 'as the subject rather than the object of the teaching and learning process', devoted to what Benjamin beautifully captured as 'a life more deeply conceived'.

More recently, the classic contemporary definition of the liberal humanist university was set out in the [Magna Charta Universitatum](#) signed in Bologna in 1988, which suggested that both teaching and research should be free of political and economic influence and that tuition should be kept relevant to the needs of the present by being intertwined with research and intellectual inquiry.

Around the same time, the Boyer Commission in the US, named for the education theorist Ernest Boyer, established an Academic Bill of Rights that guaranteed students 'opportunities to learn through enquiry rather than simple transmission of knowledge'. An approach commensurate with this commitment was innovated with at US universities Stanford and MIT, whereby undergraduate students worked on research projects in collaboration with academics, even presenting at conferences and authoring papers together.

In the UK, the experimentation with this approach at Warwick and Imperial led to the uptake of research-led teaching as a key concern of the HEA, building on proposals in the 2003 HE White Paper. This was consolidated with the establishment of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching in Learning in the UK in 2005, devoted to the promotion of learning based in research and inquiry- examples include Warwick, Sheffield and Reading.

As the peak of this wave, Student as Producer was initially developed at the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research, University of Warwick, in the mid-2000s. It was later implemented as a fully-fledged strategic and organising principle at the University of Lincoln in the 2010s, led by Neary, then Dean of Teaching and Learning and Director of Lincoln's Graduate School.

At Warwick and Lincoln, Student as Producer developed in response to the 'student as consumer' model that arose with tuition fees and the state-driven marketisation of HE in the UK. These have placed an imperative upon students to think about their degree as a means to greater employability rather than a means to greater knowledge – in spite of research suggesting that students with an overly consumerist mindset do not perform as well academically.

Overlooking innovations around research-engaged teaching alive and kicking in the sector, the 2016 HE Bill set up an opposition between research and teaching that, in the view of Neary and other advocates of Student as Producer, has only exacerbated the increasing vexed divide between them. Attendant upon this divide, it also risks encouraging an unhealthy and sometimes antagonistic distance between student and teacher. Indeed, studies suggest that the experience of students enrolled at research-intensive universities is not always particularly positive.

Subjects rather than objects of history

Student as Producer begins from an analysis of the structural dysfunctionality inherent in this state of affairs. As set out in an HEA report summarising its successes, Student as Producer works to reunite teaching and research as two interrelated aspects of academic life. It does so partly by rejecting the idea that students themselves sit 'at the heart of the university system'. Rather, for Student as Producer the 'heart-beat' of the university is the production of knowledge and meaning itself, and despite the creeping tendency to separate the one out from the other, places students as part and parcel of this.

Encouraging a spirit of independent collaborative discovery, in practice Student as Producer is based on three prongs. Firstly, *problem-based learning* centring on small-group collaboration and reflection around 'open-ended' problems, with teachers fulfilling the role of facilitating and supporting learning self-organised by the groups themselves. Secondly, it is based on *enquiry-based learning* structured around the provision of 'scenarios' to which students bring their own 'issues and questions'

facilitated by the teacher, and then seek out the resources they need to answer them. Third, it is based on *research-based learning*, typically organised across a whole programme, where methodology training supports students to engage with 'authentic research problems in the public domain that involve engagement with the wider community'.

The evidence points to many benefits to the Student as Producer approach. As the HEA report attests, Lincoln was awarded a commendation from the QAA Institutional Review 2012 for the learning enhancements underpinned by Student as Producer, as well as being recognised as an example of good and effective practice by both the QAA and the HEA. At Lincoln, there was a high level of support for the Student as Producer model of research-engaged teaching and learning among students themselves, with 95% of those surveyed appreciating its benefits. Students reported the more engaged mode of learning enabling them to overcome a lack of concentration and motivation experienced in more conventional forms of delivery.

More generally, research-based learning has been shown to improve the critical and evaluative thinking and problem-solving skills of students. There is evidence that a research-led approach such as Student as Producer appeals to non-traditional and non-standard students such as mature and part-time students, overcoming the 'alienation' that some scholars identify with the educational experiences of marginalised classes and identities traditionally less well accommodated by HE in the UK.

With the increasing imperative to look beyond university to the world of work, students at Lincoln felt the benefits of Student as Producer not only for their learning, but for employability and everyday life. The approach equips students with vital capabilities for high-skilled work in the contemporary labour market, like project working and collaboration. As they await entry into a complex, uncertain world, Student as Producer enables students to engage critically with that world by seeing themselves anew – namely, as what Neary terms '*subjects rather than objects of history*'.

As subjects rather than objects of history, students seize the responsibility to be critical, confident scholars in their own right. In my experience, experimenting with Student as Producer principles in my teaching affords students the opportunity to engage with sides of academic life they do not always get the chance to see, bridging the divide. This has included involving them in my own research through student research assistantships tied to business partnerships, and emulating aspects of the academic research process in classroom environments through research projects and conference-style paper presentations. These are small steps I am keen to develop further.

All in all, I have found Student as Producer an insightful guide for involving students in wider academic life as active participants in the production and critique of knowledge rather than their passive recipients. The Ed Ex lecture with Professor Neary will be an excellent opportunity to learn more about this radical and revolutionary take on research-rich teaching.